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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: IRAN/TURKMENISTAN: IRAN,S AMBASSADOR ON THE EVE OF
BERDIMUHAMEDOV'S VISIT TO TEHERAN

¶1. (U) The Russian-language "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" published an interview on February 11 with Iran's Ambassador to Turkmenistan, Mohammad-Reza Forqani. The interview focused almost exclusively on economic and trade topics, avoiding anything even remotely controversial such as the Iranian nuclear issue, relations with the United States or even the price Iran most recently agreed to pay Turkmenistan for natural gas.

DETAILS OF THE VISIT: EVEN SKETCHIER THAN USUAL

¶2. (SBU) President Berdimuhamedov was reported to be traveling to Iran on February 13 for an "official visit," although the press reports this week have offered next to no details about the nature of the visit. (NOTE: A Turkish diplomat told us this week that an Iranian Embassy contact confirmed to him at the Iranian national day reception that Berdimuhamedov would meet with Iranian President Ahmadinejad. END NOTE.)

IRAN'S "ECONOMIC SUCCESSES" EMPHASIZED

¶3. (U) Ambassador Forqani highlighted what he termed Iran's "economic successes," noting the GNP of 324 billion USD in 2008, and 126 billion USD in foreign trade. He also said that the Government's economic priorities are to "raise the standard of living and improve the social welfare (of Iranians)." He went on to note that 55% of the 2.4 million students at universities and other institutions of higher learning in Iran are women. He went on to say that the country's literacy rate has gone from 39% in 1979 to 92% in ¶2008. When asked about his country's foreign policy goals, Ambassador Forqani described them as "justice, peace, and the development of a mutually beneficial relationship with all of the countries of the world," especially Iran's neighbors.

SOCIO-CULTURAL TIES WITH TURKMENISTAN

¶4. (U) As is customary, Ambassador Forqani focused on Iran and Turkmenistan's "shared culture and history," listing a number of poets and historical figures revered in both countries, including Mahmud Kashgari, Aburehan Biruni, Alisher Anvari and others. A number of them, he said, will be the topic of a series of conferences and seminars that the

Iranian Cultural Center plans to hold in Turkmenistan, in addition to the "Iranian Culture Days" that the Iranian Embassy organizes on a regular basis.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The Ambassador's interview was typical of what the Turkmen press offers on Iran: No controversy, and lots of emphasis on the cultural ties between the two countries. It, along with another article in the same newspaper February 13 that focused on trade ties with Iran, were all that was communicated publicly on the eve of Berdimuhamedov's visit. END COMMENT.
MILES